Restaurant an Icon for Decades

By: Dale C. Maley
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Many current Fairbury citizens have fond memories of the restaurant at the northeast corner of First and Oak Streets. It started as a Tastee-Freez and later became RD's Drive-In.

The story of this restaurant began with the birth of Fred Mengarelli in 1892 in Pesaro, Italy. The Mengarelli family emigrated from Italy to Chicago in 1909 when Fred was 17 years old. By 1917, Fred had moved to Pontiac, and he registered for the World War I draft as a Pontiac resident.

In 1930, at the age of 38, Fred married Lena Margiotta in Chicago. Lena was 25 years of age when she married Fred. They had three sons and one daughter. Unfortunately, the daughter, Marie Mengarelli, died at just five years of age. One of the sons of Fred and Lena Mengarelli was Fred Mengarelli Jr.

By the time of the 1940 US Census, the Fred Mengarelli family lived at 915 West Madison Street in Pontiac. Fred owned and operated the Dixie Cafe in Pontiac.

In May 1952, the Blade reported that a new ice cream stand would soon open in the remodeled Standard Oil gas station at the northeast corner of First and Oak Streets. The article said that Fred Mengarelli Sr. of Pontiac had purchased the building, and his sixteen-year-old son, Fred Mengarelli Jr., would operate the business.

At about this same time, the Pantagraph sent a photographer to Fairbury to take two photos of Fairbury's new ice cream stand. The Pantagraph decided not to publish an article using these photos. The Pantagraph recently agreed to release their old negatives to the McLean County Museum of History. The museum scans the old negatives and makes them available for free.

One of the Pantagraph photos shows the original Tastee-Freez building. The other photograph is of an unidentified young man serving a young lady an ice cream cone. The employee is believed to be Fred Mengarelli Jr., and the customer is likely to be Edna Winterland, who lived across the street from the restaurant.

In 1953, Fred Mengarelli Jr. graduated from Pontiac High School. He continued to operate the Tastee-Freez until Bruce Lee purchased the business in 1956.

The Mengarelli family moved from Pontiac to Marin County, California, in 1958. Fred Mengarelli Sr. owned and operated the Flamingo Liquor store on Fourth Street until his wife died in 1962. After his wife's death, Fred Sr. moved to San Jose with one of his

sons. Fred Sr. passed away in 1972 at the age of 80. Fred Mengarelli Jr. is still living in California.

The family story of the second owners of this restaurant began with the birth of William Henry Lee in Kentucky in 1903. He married Carrie Willis in Cane Valley, Kentucky, in 1924. William was 20, and Carrie was 18 when they married. They relocated to the Chenoa area, and their son Willis Lee was born in Chenoa. Son Bruce Vinal Lee was born in Chenoa in 1926. In the 1940 Census, William Lee was a farm laborer in Yates Township west of Fairbury.

In 1946, Bruce V. Lee married Louise Bunting. She was the daughter of Albert C. Bunting (1900-1945) and Emma E. Grove (1903-1988) of Fairbury. Bruce and Louise Lee had three daughters.

In January of 1956, the Blade reported that Bruce Lee had purchased the Tastee-Freez in the previous month of December. At that time, Bruce was 30 years old. The daughters of Bruce and Louise Lee also worked at the Tastee-Freez.

The tenth anniversary of Lee's owning the Tastee-Freez was celebrated in 1965. A Blade ad noted the menu and prices of popular items at the restaurant. These prices included $1.20 for a chicken basket, $.65 for a fish basket, $.99 for a six-piece shrimp basket, and $.55 for a hamburger, fries, and cole-slaw. The business phone number was 692-2233.

In 1967, Bruce Lee placed an ad in the Pantagraph offering the Tastee-Freez for sale. The ad noted the business offered curb service, was doing a large volume selling ice cream, and had a sandwich and lunch business on the busiest corner in Fairbury on US Route 24. The ad noted the restaurant had a large paved lot with a deluxe canopy for 20 cars.

Robert Philemon Walter purchased the Tastee-Freez in 1967. Robert Walter Sr. was born in Saunemin in 1923. He was a World War II veteran. In 1944, Robert Walter Sr. married Bernice Irene Smith, and they had two children. Robert Walter Sr. died in 1981 at the age of 58.

Before the construction of Westview grade school, boys played their little league baseball games on a diamond at the fairgrounds. After Westview was built, volunteers built a new little league diamond just south of the school. Local businesses sponsored the teams. In the late 1960s, after a game was over, the players would walk three blocks north to get a free soft drink at the Tastee-Freez.

In 1976, the Blade announced that Ted Doran had purchased the Walter's Tastee-Freez. The Dorans changed the name of the business to RD's Drive-Inn. The restaurant was named after Ted's wife, Ruth Doran. The Ted Doran family also announced that RD's Drive-Inn would be open seven days a week. Simultaneously, the new Dairy Queen operated by Mr. and Mrs. Don Gieselman of El Paso opened for business.

Around 1994, Ted Doran decided to retire, and the restaurant was closed. The Fehr Real Estate firm purchased the facility and used it for their real estate office. Ted Doran died in 2017 at the age of 83. Ruth Doran died in 2021 at the age of 85. Bruce and Louise Lee live in Florida.

For over 40 years, the restaurant at the northeast corner of First and Oak Streets was a Fairbury favorite. Older citizens remember it as the Tastee-Freez, and younger citizens remember it as RD's Drive-Inn.

Tastee-Freez when it opened in May of 1952.